



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH  
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December 10, 2002

**TO:** Washington State Board of Health Members  
Seattle King County Board of Health Members

**FROM:** Don Sloma, Executive Director, State Board of Health  
Maggie Moran, Administrator, King County Board

**RE: PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN  
GENOMICS**

**Background and Summary**

In recent years, a unique international collaboration among more than 1,000 public and private sector researchers has resulted in the mapping of the human genome. This is the chemical structure of the human DNA molecule that appears to contain the "coding" for the development of human life.

The completion of the so-called "Human Genome Project" has been widely regarded as revolutionary for many human institutions including marriage, family, public health, medicine, government, the law, criminal justice and more.

However, the recent revelations may obscure the less dramatic, but perhaps more pervasive use of a wide variety of DNA based technologies. These include the use of DNA as evidence in criminal investigations, the 35-year-old mandate in all states for the universal screening of newborns for a few genetically identifiable health conditions, the use of genetics-assisted diagnostic techniques and more. As Human Genome Project Director Francis Collins and internationally known researcher Alan Guttmacher stated in their recent New England Journal of Medicine article, among the many inaccurate perceptions about genetics are the perceptions that "... in the past it [genetics] had no effect on the practice of medicine and that its influence today is pervasive. In fact, for decades knowledge of genetics has had a large role in the health care of a few patients and a small role in the health care of many. We have recently entered a transition period in which specific genetic knowledge is becoming critical to the delivery of effective health care for everyone." (Please see article attached.)

As we enter this new era, a wide variety of new genetic technologies will become available. Each will be attended by important public policy questions. Often, these will include questions about the public health impacts of making these technologies widely available, of regulating their use or of considering their prohibition. While many of these questions will fall on federal regulatory, judicial or legislative entities, some come directly within the purview of state and

local public health officials. For example, the State Board of Health is currently considering the inclusion of several genetically identifiable health conditions for which all newborns may be required to be screened. In addition, the State Board recently completed a legislatively mandated yearlong review of federal and state laws and rules governing access to and use of genetic information and the potential for unfair discrimination. The resulting report included several recommendations for public policy change.

This morning's presentation by two nationally known local experts in public health, genetics, public policy and ethics was requested by the Chairs of the King County Board of Health and the State Board of Health with the goal of acquainting the two boards more closely with genetics and public health. It is hoped that the presentations will stimulate thought about next steps the boards might take to advance the public health policy dialogue on these important matters.

**Recommended Board Action:**

None at this time.